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ABSTRACT

Based on interviews with 150 persons in departments of education and in national, provincial, and territorial education organizations in Canada's major capital cities, this paper discusses seven vital issues in Canadian education and briefly states seven others. The seven major issues needing resolution concern: (1) the appropriate balance between central and local control of education; (2) the amendment of provincial school legislation according to the principles outlined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; (3) the appropriateness of official language policies for any or all of the provinces; (4) native people's control of their children's education; (5) the amount of provincial resources directed to developing and maintaining multicultural programs in schools; (6) the manner of provincial funding for education; and (7) the justification of private educational alternatives. Other issues include curriculum relevancy and enrichment, school responsibiltiy for controversial issues such as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), mainstreaming handicapped children, the aging teaching force, teacher preparation, and professional autonomy. Generally, Canadian educational objectives have shifted from anglicization and assimilation of immigrants to support of a cultural "mosaic" and gradual, evolutionary acculturation. Individual freedom and choice has gained in contrast to conformity to the predominant group. (MLH)

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John J. Bergen

Introduction

During the first seven months of 1986 I visited every capital city in Canada and a few additional major cities in some of the provinces. I interviewed about 150 persons in departments of education and in national and provincial (and territorial) education organizations, such as those of teachers and school trustees, and also the superintendents of school systems in all of the cities I visited. I also collected hundreds of printed items. Free of teaching and most other university duties during the next seven months, I shall attempt to complete a first draft of a monograph in which the emphasis is to be on issues in education -- such issues in education which primarily concern educational administrators. In this paper I restrict myself to some of the issues which were emphasized by my respondents during interviews. Certainly most of what I report in this paper has also become available through print materials and news releases. The documentation and footnoting will be part of the proposed monograph.

For the purpose of this paper, an issue is a "point in question" or a "point in dispute," as defined by some dictionaries. That is, an issue is a matter about which there is not a general consensus, and about which it is unlikely that consensus can be achieved. An issue may be resolved by means of a vote, in which case the majority vote decides the direction of a course of action. The issue may also be resolved by an elected body -- a school board, a legislature, or by the caucus of the house majority. It might also be resolved by the decision of a cabinet minister, or of premier. Some issues are resolved by the decisions of appointed administrators, such as deputy ministers, school superintendents, or school principals. Issues may also be resolved through negotiation or by arbitration.

However, the resolution of an issue does not constitute a solution of a problem. A clear definition of an issue aids its resolution -- pointing in a certain direction for action. Once an issue has been resolved, though not necessarily to the satisfaction of all who are concerned, it is possible to define the problems which must be solved in order to achieve the intent of a resolved issue. The solution of problems concerns matters such as: precisely what is to be done; how what is to be done; who is responsible for what; and, who does what. In this paper I am not dealing with the definition of problems nor with their solution.

Selected Issues

I state each issue in the form of a question, and then comment on the same.

1. What is an appropriate balance between central and local control of education?

Ultimately provincial governments are responsible for the state of education in their jurisdictions. Central control may make things simpler, and to some degree more efficient. However, some school boards have been able to respond creatively to needs in multicultural education with their own districts in a manner which might have taxed the imagination of provincial bureaucrats. If such holds true for school boards, might that also hold true for school communities? "Community schools" are an example of such efforts by interested groups at the school level. The intent of the Quebec government to increase the autonomy of the local school unit through direct participation of teachers and parents still remains an unresolved issue.

2. To what extent should provincial school legislation be amended in response to the principles outlined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

Wherever school legislation is being revised, or bills for the enaction of new school acts are about to be debated, their drafters attempt to articulate at least as much as is deemed to be basically required. However, as the Charter is paramount, any school legislation may be subject to challenge on the basis of the Charter. Such applies to the right to be given instruction in the minority official language, in French or in English, and such may include rights with respect to instruction in one of the aboriginal languages, and also in one of the many other languages in the context of the Charter's reference to multiculturalism. Some provincial departments of education have sought to approach the intent of the Charter through ministerial regulations. Unresolved matters concern also the rights of parents with respect to the education of their children, and the rights of teachers, and also the rights of students with respect to appeal procedures. In Newfoundland some parents are holding that the Charter would provide them with the right to schools other than those under denominational boards. Elsewhere, religious practices, such as the recitation of the Lord's prayer in public schools, are being questioned in the context of the Charter.

3. To what extent ought official language policies be introduced in any or all of the provinces?

New Brunswick through a legislative act in 1969 became officially a bilingual province, and Manitoba more recently through a challenge of its 1890 legislation which required a formerly bilingual province to become unilingual. Ontario has moved to provide for French-language school districts, such as New Brunswick has had for some time, and for the representation of francophones on boards of districts having francophone residents in sufficient number. The Fransaskois of Saskatchewan are clamoring for the establishment of a province-wide board for French schools. In Edmonton, francophone parents would like to see the establishment of a francophone school board in charge of French-language schools. What might be the eventual impact of such movements on education provincially and nationally?

4. To what extent ought native peoples be given autonomy in the control of the education of their children?

For at least a century attempts have been made by the predominant "white" society to school native children using basically the same curricula and methods developed for its children. These attempts have been met with little success. Yet any prospects for employment and adequate income in the coming decades seem to suggest that a major integration of the natives in the total Canadian society ought to take place. Native peoples might accept a degree of acculturation, but may abhor the prospect of an assimilation which annihilates their languages and cultures. Attempts to resolve such issues are being made through special projects of provincial departments designed to meet the aspirations of native peoples for their children. Associated with this is the matter of whether native concerns are best served through federal or provincial offices.

5. How much of provincial resources ought to be directed to the development and maintenance of multicultural programs in schools?

The September 1986 Canadian Education Association Conference concentrated on the theme of "Canadian Education in a Pluralistic Society." Particularly since World War II many immigrants have come to Canada from other than European countries. For merely "invisible" ethnics have been joined by multitudes of "visible" ethnics. School systems of larger cities, such as Vancouver, Winnipeg and Toronto, have not only supported heritage programs in schools, but have found these helpful in integrating the children from immigrant families in the prevailing milieu. Basic to such considerations is the fact that today one-third of all Canadians are neither of English-speaking nor of French-speaking background. Over half of the children in the Vancouver School District come from homes

in which the first language is other than English. Presently, Manitoba has 15 heritage language programs, for example, and Ontario has even more. In order to facilitate the resolution of multicultural issues, in 1974 Saskatchewan became the first province to pass a Multicultural Act, and ten years later Alberta passed a Cultural Heritage Act. Bilingual language schools, in which instruction is in English half of the time and in a language other than French half the time, have been organized in places like Edmonton and Winnipeg.

6. In what manner ought a province fund the education of its children?

Whether the major share of the cost of schooling is borne by the province or by a school district, or whether the province accepts responsibility for the total cost, varies from province to province. The total cost is affected by such matters as whether handicapped children are integrated in regular schools or not whether alternatives, such as separate, denominational or private schools are funded in part or in whole and whether additional financing is either required or offered for instruction in a minority official language, a native language, or a language other than English or French.

7. To what extent are alternatives in education justified?

Separate schools (mostly Catholic) in three provinces (Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan), denominational schools in Newfoundland, and confessional (Catholic and Protestant) school systems in Quebec are based on constitutional arrangements. Ontario awaits a Canada Supreme Court decision regarding the extension of financing of separate Catholic schools to include all secondary grades. In all provinces some parents have sought the freedom of choice for their children in private schools. Private school movements are strongest in Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta, yet the enrollments remain a small percentage of the total provincial school enrollments. Does such diversity contribute positively to the education of children and to the national welfare of our country? The debate on this question may continue for some time, for there is at this time no conclusive research evidence available to provide a definitive direction for decision. As the choice for private schooling is not undergirded constitutionally, each province seeks to resolve the issue within the provincial context through legislation and regulation, and there is no one model which reflects the practice in all or most provinces. Five of the provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Quebec) provide for a measure of public funding for private schools. The Shapiro Commission recommended such also for Ontario.

8. A series of issues I will mention without further discussion include the following:

8.1 To what extent can efforts be made to make high school curricula relevant and useful for today's generation of young people?

8.2 What is an appropriate balance between defined "core" subjects and other courses which also enrich the mind and life of the student?

8.3 To what degree should schools accept responsibility for controversial courses, such as teaching about sex and AIDS?

8.4 To what degree is the integration of severely handicapped children in regular classrooms a defensible alternative?

8.5 To what degree ought education officials be concerned about the rejuvenation of a generally aging teacher force?

8.6 What promising alternatives in the preparation and in-service training of teachers ought to be considered?

8.7 To what degree ought professional autonomy be granted teachers through legislation?

Concluding Observations

In half a century the emphasis in Canadian education has shifted from an objective of anglicization (particularly in the west) and the assimilation of immigrants (the American

"melting-pot" philosophy) to that of not only tolerating but supporting a "mosaic" of cultures in anticipation of a gradual and evolutionary acculturation. From one-language proficiency in students, many parents are expecting proficiency in at least two languages; increasing numbers of children from English-speaking homes are being placed in French instruction programs by their parents. Individual freedom and choice has gained in contrast to conformity to the predominant group. Alternatives in education are not only tolerated, but have the official sanction of provincial education authorities. Will these developments contribute positively to the status of education provincially and nationally, and promote the growth of a stronger Canadian nation? No doubt these developments are costly to finance. But at this moment there is no evidence that they could be detrimental over time. Perhaps such diversity may make for a stronger social amalgam than would any restrictive uniformity.